

Malefic Magic in the Greek Curse Tablets of the Classical Period and in the “Curse Effigies” of *Ala* deity of African Traditional Religion (ATR)

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The human effort to manipulate the spiritual world and achieve supernatural effects through the use of magic or mystical forces is as old as the human race. This practice also cuts across many religions and cultures of the world. Sometimes it is done through the use of charms, incantations, casting of spells, the burning of different kinds of spiritual objects, the wearing of amulets or the use of curse tablets. Although the primary aim of this sort of spiritual manipulation may be to protect the person engaged in them from harmful spiritual forces, such practices have given rise to various kinds of occult exercises some of which aim at bringing harm to perceived enemies or detractors of the supplicant. This is mostly done through the use of curse tablets in some traditions. The paper seeks the lines of agreement and difference between the use of Greek curse tablets and incantations to manipulate the spiritual forces and the use of such spells in the shrine of *Ala* deity in Igboland, South-East Nigeria.

Keywords: *Ala* deity, ATR, Curse tablets, Effigies, Greek Religion, Igboland, Shrine.

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INTRODUCTION

In classical Greek spiritual orientations, the curse tablets played a very important role. Archeological discoveries have uncovered many of such curse tablets in the Greek world of the Classical Period and about 110 of them have been published, while many more are still awaiting the analysis of scholars. The Greek curse tablets were “inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will” (Jordan, 1985). The Greeks most commonly referred to them as *katadesmoi*. This word derives from the verb *katadein*, which means to ‘tie up’ or ‘bind down’. In effect, what the tablets tend to do is to bind or tie down their targets (Gager, 1992). This could be the reason for naming them “curse tablets” a term which Joshua Grimes considers inappropriate (Grimes, 2016). He considers the term inappropriate since the tablets are not used to curse but rather to bind opponents. However, we will refer to them as “curse tablets” in this paper since the tablets are intended to inflict some level of harm on their target. The most commonly used Latin word for the tablets is *Defixio*. This word is very rare in Latin documents. However the verb from which it derives, *defigee*, ‘to fix’, ‘to fasten’ or ‘to nail down’ is sometimes met on curse tablets, expressing one of the functions

of the curse, which is to 'fix' its victim and prevent them from carrying out certain tasks or physical functions.¹ In *The Republic* and *The Laws*, Plato mentions the use of enchantments and spells to constrain the gods to harm the just and the unjust alike.²

There is evidence of the use of such "curse effigies" and amulets in some shrines of African Traditional Religion (ATR). We call them "curse effigies" because they are not written on tablets but on paper tied to effigies or figurines. In the shrine of the *Ala* deity in Nguru, Imo State, Nigeria, such effigies were discovered in 2018 when a group of people sacked the shrine. The shrine was already in disuse due to the death of the Chief priest. Hence, the people believed that the derelict shrine in their town was the reason for their setback in businesses and other ventures. During the sacking of the shrine, the people stumbled upon effigies or dolls that were tied together, with the names of certain individuals written on them. Some of these effigies were deposited in a shallow grave at the middle of the forest where the shrine was located. In few instances, the names of the targets were written down with the fate that is invoked on them. Accompanying some of the names is the name of the deity that is supposed to effect the malediction, with the *Ala* deity called upon as mediator. The circumstances behind the writing of the names and tying them to the effigies were not immediately known to the onlookers. This led to a curious search for meanings. It also led to the search for the presence of such effigies in other shrines of ATR and to seek for a cultural connectivity between the Greek cultural or spiritual mindset of the Classical Period and the current spiritual belief of some Igbos of the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. The oral interviews were conducted between 15th to 22nd October, 2023 and it gave rise to this paper. This research has led to the realization that such effigies are also present in other shrines of ATR in many parts of Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approaches in this paper are historical, phenomenological and ethnographic. The study adopts a historical approach because the Greek curse tablets of the Classical Period have been excavated by archeologists from the ancient past to be studied in the present. Since these tablets are presented through excavations, some of the materials have been reconstructed by archeologists. This reconstruction explains the presence of many broken lines and scrambled names in some of the texts. The historical

approach is informed by phenomenology since the study sought to understand the Greek curse tablets the same way the Greeks of the Classical Period understood them. This will enable the authors to relate them to the effigies of the *Ala* deity the way they are understood by those who use them. The ethnographic method involves the gathering of information through sample oral interviews which was conducted with the custodians of the *Ala* shrine and other men involved in the activities of the deity as well as observations made on visiting such shrines. This became necessary to fill the gap of lack of literature on the use of the curse effigies in the shrines of the *Ala* deity. Twenty men were interviewed randomly (see appendix). The men interviewed, who among them was the community leader, range between the ages of 45 to 84 years. The reason for interviewing only men was as a result of their involvement in the discovery of the curse effigies in the *Ala* Shrine at Nguru and because of their knowledge of the traditions of *Ala*. To some extent, their discovery and belief bear resemblance with some aspects of the Greek curse tablets.

REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE

There is growing interest among scholars on the theme of Greek religion. This is because of the increasing realization of the extent of the influence of the Greek culture on many other cultures of the world. A couple of scholars have also written on the Greek curse tablets in books and scholarly journals. Two leading names in this area are C. A. Faraone, a Classics professor at the University of Chicago, and John Gager, professor of religious studies at Princeton University. In his *Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of "Voodoo Dolls" in Ancient Greece*, Faraone provides ample examples of the Greek practice of burying or binding effigies done in the image of deities or *daimones*. He brings to the knowledge of his readers that although the Greeks used different kinds of effigies to represent the gods and human enemies, they normally use the dolls not meant for public notice to represent the *daimones* (Faraone, 1991). Because they are not easily noticed by the public, they could secretly affect the targets of the curse.

In his *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, J. G. Gager surveys different kinds of binding tablets throughout the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE. He also gives examples of how these tablets or *defixiones* are used.³ He notes that the spells extend into every aspect of ancient life - athletic and theatrical competitions, judicial proceedings, love affairs, business rivalries, and the recovery of stolen property. He surmises that these spells were intended to bring other people under the power and control of those who commissioned them.

¹ Cf. "Curse Tablets from Roman Britain," accessible at <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/beginners/intro-greece.shtml>.

² Plato, *Republic*, 364c; Plato, *Laws*, 993a. The citation from Plato's works is taken from H. N. Fowler (trans.), *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 12*, (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University, 1921).

³ John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University, 1992).

Although there are other scholars who have written on this subject, the authors agree with the verdict of J. Grimmes that “The works of Faraone and Gager are, however, most likely to immediately appear in a search for publications on the subject.”⁴ What could be concluded from these studies is that the practice of the use of the curse tablets was in vogue in the Greco-Roman world for about ten centuries (fifth century BCE to fifth century CE). These studies also see the use of the *defixiones* as a form of magic.

On the other hand, *Ala* (also called Ana or Ani by various Igbo dialects) is the most worshipped deity in Igbo land⁵ and many other parts of Africa. She is seen as the earth goddess and regarded as the mother of the universe.⁶ Every occurrence in Igbo traditional society is somehow related to the earth (Kanu, 2002). Because of its fertility, the earth “is the archetype of all forms of maternity. It is the symbol of love because it mothers and cares for all things that exist.”⁷ In works of art, she is given the symbol of the crescent moon and often depicted as a seated woman holding a small child in her arms.⁸ Despite the ebullient scholarly writings about her, studies have not been found that try to link the function of the Greek curse tablets to the use of effigies in shrines of the *Ala* deity. It is this deficit that this paper tries to address. The increasing resurgence of attention to the ATR deities by a greater number of the African youth, makes this study especially relevant.

The Greek Idea of *Daimones*

Since the *daimones* played a decisive role in the Greek curse tablets, it is important to understand how the Greeks perceived the *daimones* during this period. During the Classical Period, the *daimones* were not principally evil agents, as demons are seen today. Rather, they were the active force of the gods. In Homer, the *daimones* “were simply supernatural forces of various kinds that intervened in the course of events for good or ill.”⁹ They referred to “the impersonal power of the gods collectively and indefinitely...

as the dispenser of individual events” (Ferguson, 2003). In the words of Burkert “*daimon* does not designate a specific class of divine beings, but a particular mode of activity.”¹⁰ In the *Cratylus*, Socrates sees *daimones* (demons) as having the same root as *daemon* (deity) in the old form of the Greek language.¹¹ However, it seems as though he characterized the *daimones* as personal agents with a specific place or function in the order of things.¹² This shows a subtle development in the Greek idea of *daimones*.

As the Greek thought on the *daimon* continued to develop, the *daimon* came to be regarded as an object of cultic worship especially in the cult of Dionysus. And in some cases, the Greek *daimon* was not only worshipped but was also invoked sometimes for what could be called a spell or incantation. These spells are intended to beckon on the *daimones* to come to the aid of the supplicant or to harm or restrain an adversary. The invocation of the *daimon* for such purposes is mainly through the use of curse tablets. The tablets are usually made of lead. It is believed that the object on which the curse is written can affect the outcome of the curse. Just as lead is a cold object, the supplicant expects the fortunes of his adversary to become cold and worthless.

The *Daimones* and the Greek Curse Tablets

A distinctive feature of the Greek curse tablets is the invocation of the aid of the *daimones*. A lead tablet from Athens which dates to the fourth century BCE concerns the handing over of some individuals to the *daimones* and to Persephone. The beginning of side A of the tablet reads: “I am sending a letter to the *daimones* and to Persephone, and deliver (to them) Tribitis, (daughter of) Choirine, who did me wrong, daughter, husband and three children, two female and one male. Pagkrates Mant[ias] Diophantos Metagenes.”¹³ In essence all the family members of Tribitis were to be delivered to the *daimones* and to Persephone for the wrongs they did to the supplicant. We are not told what the *daimones* were to do with these people. However, since the supplicant is appealing for revenge for the wrongs done to him, it is to be assumed that the *daimones* should show vengeance on his behalf.

In some tablets dating from the fifth century CE there was evidence of another invocation to the *daimones* in these words: “I invoke you *daimones* who lie here, who are continually nourished here and who reside here and also you young ones who died prematurely.”¹⁴ The language of this spell suggests that the invocation was made at a cemetery and that there is continuous nourishment given to the spirits

⁴ Grimes, *Letters*, 147.

⁵ Edwin A. Udoe, *Resolving the prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation* (Wien/Berlin: Lit, 2011), 46

⁶ John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1985), 54.

⁷ Emmanuel Edeh, *Towards Igbo Metaphysics* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1985), 117. See also Kalu Ogbaa, *Understanding Things fall apart: A Student Casebook to Issues and Historical Documents* (Wesport: Greenwood, 1999), 148.

⁸ <https://www.amplifyafrica.org/the-ancient-beliefs-of-african-goddesses>.

⁹ Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan (eds.), *The Supernatural Revamped: From Timeworn Legends to Twenty-First-Century Chic* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 59.

¹⁰ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, John Raffan (trans.) (Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University, 1985), 180.

¹¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, 398b.

¹² Brodman and Doan, *The Supernatural*, 59.

¹³ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 201.

¹⁴ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 103.

of the departed in the particular cemetery where this invocation was made. Perhaps the spirits of those who died prematurely are invoked because they died a violent death (Onyenali, 2019). This invocation is to placate them to avoid them seeking revenge, except as directed by the supplicant.

Another spell reads: "I invoke you *daimones* who lie here: IEO IIIAIA EIA IAO IAE IAO ALILAMPS (I hand over (this spell) to you in the land of the dogs). *Daimones*, I place an oath on you in/by the stele of the gods."¹⁵ The land of the dogs could be a reference to the place where the tablet was deposited. As Gager concludes, "at least with the later tablets, the role of the deities and *daimones* was not to carry out the curse itself, but rather to see to it that the spirit of the dead person executed the spell as commanded."¹⁶ Hence, the *daimon* was the overseer to the actions and not the proper agent of carrying out the action.

Functions of the Greek Curse Tablets

As already noted, these spells extend into every facet of ancient life. So the authors have tried to group the curse tablets according to their functions in different situations. All the spells intend to cause some level of harm or restraint on a target. Some are used in the context of judicial proceedings, to restrain the oratorical prowess of a target's advocates while others are used to restrain the powers of an opponent in an athletic or theatrical contest. There are also curse tablets over a corpse. The last group consists of *eros*-spells to force a woman to fall in love with an admirer. In some ways, this grouping corresponds with the curse effigies found in some *A/a* shrines.

Judicial Curse Tablets

In the context of judicial proceedings, some curses are invoked to stop lawsuits. Others are invoked to influence a lawsuit already initiated. A spell to bind an opponent comes from a lead tablet found in Attica measuring 17cm x 6cm. It implores the gods of the underworld to come to the aid of the supplicant in a lawsuit by binding his opponent and his advocates.

In the presence of Hermes of the underworld and Hecate of the underworld, let Pherenicus be bound. I bind Galene who belongs to Pherenicus, in the presence of Hermes of the underworld, and Hecate of the underworld. And just as this lead is worthless and cold, so may that man and his doings be worthless and cold and for those on his side, whatever they say or plan about me. Thersilochus, Oenophilus, Philotius, and if there is any other man who is a co-advocate alongside

Pherenicus, let him be bound, in the presence of Hermes of the underworld and Hecate of the underworld. Pherenicus' spirit and mind and tongue and plans and the things he does, and the things he is planning about me, let all these things work against him and against those planning and working with him...¹⁷

Evidently, this curse tablet is an imprecation, imploring the gods of the underworld to handle the case of the supplicant against their adversaries. The names of the gods of the underworld are given as Hermes, whose principal function was to guide the dead to their final resting place, and Hecate, his consort, whose role was to lead the dead back to the world as ghosts. The people to be bound are Pherenicus and Galene who belong together. Perhaps they are members of the same household. Others, like Thersilochus, Oenophilus, Philotius, advocates of Pherenicus are to be likewise bound. If, as have been postulated, the curse is in the context of a lawsuit, then Thersilochus, Oenophilus, Philotius could be the lawyers or supporters of Pherenicus. The concluding part of the curse shows that both physical and spiritual bondage are invoked against Pherenicus and those who support him. As is evident, the targets of the curse are supposed to be cold as the lead tablet on which such a curse is written down.

In some cases, people scramble the names of their opponents in a lawsuit on curse tablets. The idea is that such scrambling would affect the persons involved. This explains why many of the curse tablets contain names that are scrambled. Relatedly, some supplicants nail the names of their targets onto curse tablets. An example that encapsulates these maneuvers is a lead tablet measuring 7cm x 23cm which is written on both sides, originally folded and pierced with a nail. On side B of the tablet following lines were noted:

And Menôn the son of Aristoklês, both him and the actions of Menôn and his tongue and words and actions; and that he may prove useless to the authorities, and also Pithios and Eukolinê and her life(?)... and (name lost) ANaphlustios and Xenokritos and Sôsinomos (?); and Aris[...], Nikias (?), Charisios (?), the sons of Diophan(tês)... and (Lusi)machos, of Phula; Lusimachidês, the son of Philinos from (the deme of) Peiraeus. The god who restrains holds the advocates with Nikios and Hêdulê the daughter of Timokratês.¹⁸

The mention of advocates in this curse indicates a legal proceeding. Some of the names lost and those we do not

¹⁵ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 104.

¹⁶ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 118.

¹⁷ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 127.

¹⁸ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 126.

have in full indicate such process of scrambling. The scrambling of a name is meant to scramble the fate of those concerned. In the same line it is believed that such a spell can make an orator in a court to be confused or to forget his speech,¹⁹ thereby making him a weak advocate.

Sporting Curse Tablets

Some tablets contain curses meant to bind opponents in a sporting event. In one of such tablets the following was written:

Restrained are... the boxers, Aristomachoes and Aristonumos. Restrain all their power. Euandria, daughter of Charikleides..., treacherpous Doris (daughter) of Aristokrates. May Persephone restrain all of her. Hermes and Hades, may you restrain all of these. *Diamon*, (may you restrain) Galene, daughter of Polukleia, by your side.²⁰

The identification of Aristomachoes and Aristonumos as boxers indicates that what is at stake is probably a boxing competition. In this case, the *daimones* are employed to aid the supplicant by restraining the powers of his opponents, thereby helping him to win. The curse even implies more. By calling on the chthonic beings to bind these individuals by their side, it suggests that the supplicant is wishing them death.²¹

Curse Tablets over a Corpse

Archeologists have discovered two curse tablets with a corpse as their medium of operation. They are also in the context of legal proceedings. What makes them different from the ones already discussed is the invocation of a corpse as the agent of realization of the curse. These tablets possibly originated from Megara. Tablet A reads: "Whenever you, O Pasianax, read this letter- but neither will you, O Pasianax, ever read this letter, nor will Neophanês ever direct a lawsuit against Aristandros. But just as you, O Pasianax, lie here idle, so also let Neophanês be idle and nothing." On tablet B the following was read: "Whenever you, O Pasianax, read this letter- but neither will you ever read this (letter), nor will Akestôr direct a lawsuit against Eratophanês- and not Timandridas either. But just as you lie here idle and nothing, so also let Akestôr and Timandridas become idle."²²

In the above curse tablet, Pasianax is a corpse and although he is not able to read the letter, he is still called upon to forestall a lawsuit. It is presumable that such curse

tablet would be buried in the graves of such a chthonic advocate. The first tablet protects Aristandros from Neophanes. The second protects Eratophaenea from both Akestor and Timandridas. As Gager observes,

a curious set of assumptions underlines the words addressed to the corpse: the first thought is that the curse will become effective as soon as the corpse reads the letter...; the second thought reflects a sudden awareness that the corpse cannot read anything. Thus the third and final thought takes the spell in an entirely new direction, no longer based on the assumption that the corpse will read the spell and carry it out but instead that the target should become as idle in his actions as the body is idle in the grave.²³

It is then possible to postulate that the supplicant presupposes that the death of Pasianax was caused by those named in the curse tablet. Hence, the involvement of Pasianax in the affairs of these people is to be seen as a sort of revenge.

Closely related to the curse tablets involving a corpse are spells which take place at graveyards. This is shown by such invocations as "I invoke you, spirit of the dead..."²⁴ This shows that the primary agents being invoked are the spirits of the dead people in the cemetery or area where the curse is pronounced. In cases where such tablets or figurines used to cast the spell are found in the graves of little children one could presume that these people were believed to have died premature death and were invoked to revenge their death.

Love Tablets and Spells

Ogden also mentions a spell found in a lead curse tablet from the first century CE, in which Sarapammon pronounces a spell with the intention of having a certain woman, Ptolemais brought to him. Within this spell, Sarapammon calls upon *daimones*, but especially the ghost-*daimon* Antinous in these words. "I adjure you all *daimones* in this place to assist this *daimon* Antinous. Rouse yourself for me and take yourself off to every district, every block, every house, and bind Ptolemais..."²⁵ This spell is then spoken directly at the *daimon* Antinous, telling him to "restrain her food, her drink" until she went to Sarapammon. It also directs the *daimon* to "drag her by the hair, the guts, until she no longer disdains [him]."²⁶ This is nothing but the use of spells

¹⁹ Faraone, *Binding*, 151-152.

²⁰ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 201.

²¹ See Grimes, *Letters*, 156

²² Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 131.

²³ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 131f.

²⁴ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 101.

²⁵ Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 250.

²⁶ Ogden, *Magic*, 250-251.

to coerce an unwilling Ptolemais to fall in love with Sarapammon.

Similar evidence from Lucian shows that it is a medium used to gain a spiritual advantage in the form of casting of love spells.²⁷ In Lucian's *Philopseudes*, Cleodemus says that he heard of a man "sending eros-dolls to get people, bringing demons up from the underworld, reanimating moldy corpses, summoning Hecate herself before him to assist him, large as life, and calling down the moon."²⁸ Here, the moon is supposed to play the role of a witness to the gods to ensure that the spell receives the binding effect it is meant to have. Prior to the casting of such spells, the agent of such an action carries clay to the house of the target of the spell and pronounces these or similar words: "Look, here is where Miss So- and-so dwells; stand above her and say the words I have chosen, assuming the appearance of the god or demon she worships."²⁹ In this spell, "the lover aims to create in his victim a state of mental fixation on himself."³⁰ Essentially, the woman desired by the caster is supposed to be led by an eros-assistant into the home of the caster. As the sources show, most of those who perform this kind of spell are males who want to win the love a coveted female.³¹

Meanwhile, the efficacy of love spells is put into doubt by Winkler in his supposition that what happens in reality is that the "intended victim is in all likelihood sleeping peacefully; blissfully ignorant of what some love-struck lunatic is doing on his (sic) roof."³² His conclusion is that the caster is always preoccupied with thoughts of the supposed victim while the victim might be oblivious of the antics of the caster. This means that the caster ends up being the victim of the love spell.³³ This is a subtle way of presenting the near or complete helplessness of the *daimones* in such matters.

The Place of *Ala* Shrines in ATR

The *Ala* Shrine is the center of sacrifice and cult meetings in Igboland. It is feared and respected by many traditional Igbo

religionists. As the custodian of communal morality, conflicts are settled at *Ala* Shrines. Ikenga-Metuh rightly avers that "Ala is the source and custodian of Omenala- customs and public morality. Accordingly, she exercises the main ritual sanctions in disputes and offenses."³⁴ When she is provoked, harvests fail and people die prematurely.³⁵ Those who have committed a sin against her are often ostracized from the community. Such people are only reintegrated into the community after the performance of propitiatory sacrifices. In Chinua Achebe's published play, *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo had to flee from Umuofia for 7 years because he committed homicide which was particularly abhorrent to *Ala* (Achebe, 2006). Because of her importance in Igboland, "her cult is organized at the family, village and clan level, so that there are family shrines, village shrines, and clan shrines of *Ala*. Public rites are performed at various stages of the farming cycle and whenever divination indicates" (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981). The actions or cultic activities in the shrine are usually public. However, the use of effigies and their ritual actions are only understood by her worshippers.

The Demons in the *Ala* Shrine

Although there are striking resemblances between the Greek curse tablets and the curse effigies of the *Ala* shrine, as we shall come to see, the Greek idea about the *daimones* and their roles in malefic magic to manipulate the spiritual world for the good of their supplicants defers significantly from the idea of the demons from the shrines of *Ala* deity. While the Greek concept of the *daimones* during the Classical Period is that they are the active force of the gods, our interviewees believe that in the *Ala* shrine, as in other shrines of ATR, the demons are the principal agents of evil. In as much as "the African conceives of reality in terms of a universe of forces that are linked together, and that are in constant interplay with one another,"³⁶ including the visible and the invisible elements, the mystical agencies in the African cosmology "could actually inflict physical evil as premonitive, corrective or punitive measure."³⁷ The African demons seem to belong to this mystical agency. Due to the influence of Christianity and Western civilization, even the traditional Igbos see the demons as agents of *Ekwensu* who are "responsible for all evils, misfortune, and wickedness in the new Igbo Christianized worldview" (Udoye, 2011). This difference is

²⁷ In the Symposium (98), Socrates identifies *Eros* as a spirit (*daimon*). In similar fashion, Faraone indicates that "both literary and iconographic evidence corroborate the impression that Eros began his career as a frighteningly demonic figure." Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), 45

²⁸ Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 13

²⁹ Ogden, *Magic*, 91.

³⁰ Ogden, *Magic*, 94.

³¹ For detailed study see M. W. Dickie, "Who Practised Love-Magic in Classic Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?" *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 50, No. 2, (2000), 566.

³² Quoted in Ogden, *Magic*, 87.

³³ See also Patricia C. Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994), 123.

³⁴ E. Ikenga- Metuh, *Concept of God in Africa* (London: Camelot, 1970), 94.

³⁵ Afigbo, A., *Prolegomena to the Study of the Cultural History of the Igbo – Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*. In F. C .Ogbalu & E. Emenanjo (Eds.), *Igbo Language and Culture* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1975). 42.

³⁶ Izu M. Onyeocha, *Africa: The Question of Identity* (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), 99.

³⁷ E. Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religion* (Onitsha: IMICO, 1987), 161.

decisive in perceiving the thought pattern of the sample population of our interview.

***Ala* sporting Curse Effigies**

The interview carried out with the community leader and other traditionalists reveals that when the traditional wrestling context was in vogue, wrestlers were in the habit of supplying the names of their opponents to the shrine with the intent of rendering them powerless during the contest. This explains the presence of the effigies that were tied to sticks. Whenever a wrestler felt threatened by the fame of his opponent, he would submit the name of the opponent to be tied to a log of wood with some spells pronounced over him. This is supposed to render the opponent powerless like the wood. The names of popular traditional wrestlers of yesteryears that were brought to the shrine by their opponents are still evident proofs to this.

***Ala* Legal Effigies**

Similar to the Greek judicial curse tablets are the effigies found in the *Ala* shrine to influence a lawsuit. Some supplicants were coming to the *Ala* shrine whenever they felt threatened by an impending lawsuit in the traditional way. This traditional method involves oath-taking which the people still regard as the most effective way of settlement of disputes.³⁸ The *Ala* deity plays a prominent role in this since, as we have already explained, she is the source and custodian of traditional morality. The elements of spiritual sanction from the gods and an eventual communal sanction makes oath-taking efficacious in the religious psyche of many Africans. Some of the interviewees averred that in this situation, people who feel they have been wronged normally appeal to the shrine for justice. This is in line with the understanding that *Ala* has the ability of exposing even those who have secretly committed crimes. However, one of our respondents claimed that even some people who are in the wrong and feel that the gods could strike them down for false oaths normally come to the shrine to collect some amulets which would enable them to swear to the gods without repercussions even when they swore falsely to the other deities. However, to the knowledge of the authors, this spiritual maneuver is only thinkable if such clients come to the *Ala* shrine for propitiatory purposes since, as Kalu noted, "a false oath in her shrine could be dangerous."³⁹ This could happen when the accused person swears in the shrine of a lesser deity.

³⁸ Cf. Hilary C. Achunike, *Dreams of Heaven: A Modern Response to Christianity in North Western Igbo Land 1970-1990* (Enugu: Snaap, 1995), 113; Edwin A. Udoe, *Conflicts*, 145.

³⁹ Kalu, O. (2003). *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991*. New Jersey: African World Press Inc, 35.

***Ala* Effigies concerning the Dead**

The interviewees also explained the presence of the grave in the *Ala* shrine. The grave is supposed to enable some communion with the spirit of the departed ones. This is very significant from many fronts. As the mother of the universe, *Ala* is the appropriate connector between the living and the dead. Since the ancestors are worshipped, venerated, invoked and revered by most Africans,⁴⁰ they are supposed to influence the fortunes of the living. When a supplicant comes to the shrine and appeals for the aid of a departed relative, the intention is usually deposited at the shallow grave. This is assumed to generate some level of communion with the soul of the departed one

CONCLUSION

The study has shown how belief in the existence of chthonic beings is engrained in the Classical Greek tradition and in the Shrine of *Ala* deity. It has also shown that this belief could lead to the intention of spiritual manipulation through malefic magic. The study has also shown the belief in the existence of *daimones*/ demons in the two traditions. However, while the Greek *daimones* were originally not conceived of as evil agents, the demons that operate through the *Ala* deity are believed to be evil, especially from a Judeo-Christian perspective. In the two traditions, these spiritual beings are the media through which the curses are transferred to their targets.

Findings show that the *Ala* shrine at Nguru lost her vigor because of her contact with Western civilization and Christianity. And when the last chief priest died, no one was eager to take up the responsibility of chief priest. At some point the shrine became a relic of the historical past of the people. It was no longer serving as the centre of cultic activities and moral sanctions in the community. A sizeable portion of the community felt it was failing in its role to define and control normative behavior. Therefore, the people collectively thought it wise to destroy it as they felt it had become obstacle to their welfare and destiny.

Findings revealed the discovery of some effigies or figurines to which names were tied and used for diabolic functions by undisclosed persons. The tying of the names to the relic was an invocation of the demons to harm, incapacitate or even kill the named persons. Some respondents to the oral interview affirmed that the finding led to a communal conflict that divided the community.

Findings showed that the ritual untying and destruction of the relics was the remedy of the conflict. Ritual priests from other deities performed the ritual ceremony to undo the curse and liberate those condemned to death through the sacred relics. Through this ritual, the people believed that the demons were dissuaded from functioning as agents of death.

⁴⁰ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 75-77.

SUGGESTIONS

What the paper has done is a preliminary research into the lines of agreement between the Greek curse tablets and the curse effigies of a shrine of *Ala* in an Igbo village. It sees the existence of the curse effigies as an attempt to manipulate the spiritual world through magic. A corollary to this belief is the attempt to manipulate the spiritual world by priests of many religious traditions. In *The Republic*, Plato makes mention of such priests. In his words:

Mendicant priests and soothsayers come to the rich man's door with a story of a power they possess by the gift of heaven to atone for any offence that he or his ancestors have committed with incantations and sacrifices, agreeably accompanied by feasting. If he wishes to injure an enemy, he can, at a trifling expense, do him a hurt with equal ease, whether he be an honest man or not, by means of certain invocations and spells which, as they profess, prevail upon the gods to do their bidding...⁴¹

The above citation is interesting. The central point is the manipulation of the spiritual world to heal or to hurt. One needs only pay the agreed money to the wandering priests to perform their bidding. It is also a warning that the presence of wandering persons who collect money in order to control the spiritual world has some antiquity behind it. One of the devastation works of the wandering priests is the conflict they create in the families and communities by sowing seeds of discord by claiming to have the power to manipulate the spiritual forces.

The paper recommends further study on the actual effects of the curse objects on the intended victim or target. What is immediately evident is that the belief in the efficacy of these objects and the ability of some persons to manipulate them is the driving force for much fear for the chthonic beings. In the interim, the paper also recommends that what is needed to stem the tide of spiritual manipulations in families and communities is education, proper understanding of religion and communal dialogue.⁴² It is this proper education that cultivates the mind and liberates the people from an unnecessary fear of these chthonic beings.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

⁴¹ Plato, *Rep.* 364c.

⁴² This is the major conclusion of Rowland Onyenali, *Appraising the Nigerian Problem through Education and religious Dialogue: A Cognitive Approach*, European University Studies, vol. 1032 (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Maim, 2013).

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Appendix

NO	Name	Occupation	Age	Date
1	Okonkwo Nnam	Local chief	75	15/10/2023
2	Gregory Amaechi	Farmer	54	15/10/2023
3	Celestine Onyeulor	Farmer	60	17/10/2023
4	Ogeke Mbawa	Trader	69	16/10/2023
5	Polycarp Onu	Teacher	62	16/10/2023
6	Toochi Njoku	Teacher	53	17/10/2023
7	Ugenwa Nwabuisi	Mechanic	54	18/10/2023
8	Mgbchikwere Michael	Farmer	55	18/10/2023
9	Alfred Ude	Local Vigilante	45	18/10/2023
10	Ogu Nwachukwu	Farmer	56	19/10/2023
11	Offor Gilbert	Farmer	71	22/10/2023
12	Ike Nwachukwu	Trader	60	20/10/2023
13	Isidor Nwabuisi	Retired Police officer	84	20/10/2023
14	Alatogu Ike	Hunter	67	21/10/2023
15	Ike Franklin	Civil Servant	60	22/10/2023
16	Opara Franklin	Community leader	65	21/10/2023
17	Ihesie Madumere	Mechanic	46	19/10/2023
18	Ethelbert Chukwuma	Farmer	57	19/10/2023
19	Madu Kelechi	Civil Servant	61	16/10/2023
20	Ikenna Chukwueggu	Native doctor	75	15/10/2023